WHERE IS GOD WHEN DISASTER STRIKES?
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Psalm 29
Matthew 2:16–23

"The voice of the Lord is over the waters."
Psalm 29:3 (NRSV)

God is love. That is why he suffers. To love our sinful world is to suffer.
God so suffered for the world that he gave up his only Son to suffering.
The one who does not see God's suffering does not see his love.
God is suffering love.

So suffering is down at the center of things, deep down where the meaning is.
Suffering is the meaning of our world. For love is the meaning. And love suffers.
The tears of God are the meaning of history.

Instead of explaining our suffering, God shares it.

Nicholas Wolterstorff
Lament for a Son

"There is nothing! There is nothing! Where is God? What is God?" The anguished cry of one man, standing in a coastal village in India looking at the devastation that happened so suddenly, so violently, a tsunami, that washed away thousands of men and women in front of his eyes as they attended mass is the quintessential human cry. His question, Where is God? is "the" question that human beings have asked from the beginning of time, in times of tragedy and loss, on a large scale but also personally, small scale: my losses, my griefs—"Why has this happened?" "Why did you take him from me?" "Why has this happened to me?" It is a cry that the parents of the Bethlehem innocents surely uttered as their infants were killed by Herod's soldiers, and the survivors of earthquakes, and the spouses of soldiers who die in battle. A question a young Elie Wiesel heard from a fellow prisoner as he watched the execution of a boy at Auschwitz: "Where is God?"

Every religion has an answer of sorts. Some say that God causes the disaster to happen for a reason, to punish human sin, for instance. Some say that God causes tragedy to teach human beings something, like the brevity and fragility of life. Some say God has a master plan, which we cannot understand. And some say God is indifferent to human tragedy and that the only meaning in it is to cultivate a spirit of stoic indifference in us so that we can endure whatever happens to us.

What do we say? Where is God when disaster strikes?

The psalm for today—when the church thinks about the baptism of Jesus, a topic I will return to next Sunday—is Psalm 29, one of the most forceful and vivid in the Psalter. It is also very old, and its historical context is the very question we are asking this morning: where is God and how does God relate to the creation? God is here, the psalmist asserts. "The voice of the Lord is over the waters." God is not remote—that is to say, confined to a throne in the heavens or a distant corner of the universe or human consciousness. God is here—in the world we can touch and see and feel and smell.

The topic can become merely sentimental. Everyone loves a beautiful sunset, a majestic mountain. Every minister has heard a thousand times "I don't have to come to church to worship, Reverend. I meet God on the lake [or in the forest or on the golf course]." The psalmist issues a word of caution: "The voice of the Lord flashes forth flames of fire, shakes the wilderness, causes the oaks to whirl and strips the trees bare." Sarah Hinkley Wilson says, "Can the voice of the Lord be heard outside the church walls? Psalm 29 answers an emphatic 'yes.' With one catch: you might not like what you hear. . . . Is this really the God you want to encounter on the Appalachian Trail?" (*Christian Century,* 28 December 2004).

God is in nature. God reigns over nature, the oldest part of our faith tradition maintains. But how, exactly? How, particularly when nature becomes lethal to human life?

And so the question has been asked relentlessly, every day following the disaster. I don't recall a time when the media, in report and commentary, asked the fundamental theological question so persistently and sharply.

The New York Times columnist Bob Herbert questioned whether Einstein was correct when he said that "God does not play dice with the world" and quoted Shakespeare's Gloucester:

> as flies are to wanton boys are we to the gods.
> They kill us for their sport.

David Brooks, on New Year's Day, wrote a dark piece that seemed almost nostalgic for a God we could blame. Citing ancient myths about God sending floods to punish, Brooks said, "Stories of a wrathful God implied at least that there was an active God, who had some plan for the human race." The only meaning here, apparently, is that there is no meaning, Brooks concluded.

Manya Brashear wrote about different religious responses to natural disasters in the *Tribune*, and Eric Zorn, in a remarkable editorial, as he often does, wrote about the big theological issues personally and simply.

He described an e-mail he received from Sri Lankan friends he was worried about. "They and their families are safe. Prayers are answered." Zorn thoughtfully goes on, however: "Well, I don't know about that. I can't see all those dead kids and not wonder about the prayers of their parents that went unanswered. . . . I try not to rise to the implicit challenge in words that suggest that those who suffer had it coming, that God was insufficiently praised or begged on their behalf."

I received an e-mail last week from church members in India. "We're safe." I replied, automatically and from my heart, "Thanks be to God." I meant it. God be praised when life is safe and whole and healed and rescued. But I do not mean that God chooses to heal some and ignore the others. I pray with everything in me for my dear ones, my grandchildren, but not for a minute can I believe God does not look with equal love and tender mercy on the child for whom no one is praying.

So how *does* it work? Where is God when disaster strikes?

Without saying that God causes disasters to happen, Psalm 29, from early, early in our faith tradition, asserts that God is very much present. The question then becomes, How?

One way is that God is, in fact, in control of all the forces of nature. David Brooks, writing in the *Times*, seems to miss that God, nostalgic for the God of power and control. At least you know someone is there.

God, this position maintains, is responsible for the events that cause human beings to suffer—for whatever reason. But it is painful—extraordinarily, exquisitely painful—to hold this position or to hear this notion in the midst of personal pain and suffering. Job didn't buy it, and neither do I.

Nicholas Wolterstorff, a professor of philosophy at Yale and a Christian, lost his son Eric in a mountain-climbing accident. He wrote about his response, his struggle and pain, his questions, in an elegant little memoir, *Lament for a Son*.

> There is a hole in the world now. In the place where he was, there's now just nothing. . . . I cannot fit it all together by saying 'God did it' . . . but neither can I do so by saying 'There was nothing God could do about it.'

One thing a grieving father cannot do is attribute his son's death—any death—to God's will.

> You there—have lived out the years I've planned for you, so I'll just shake the mountains a bit. All of you there, I'll send some starlings into the engine of your plane. And as for you there, a stroke while running will do nicely. (p.66)

How does it work? If God isn't causing our suffering, where is God? The word Christian faith has is a word about the cross. The Christian response to tragedy is not an explanation, not an attempt to make it rational and understandable, but a witness, a testimony about a God who is known to us, primarily, in Jesus Christ.

Now, let's roll up our sleeves and do a little serious theological thinking.

Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall, whose work has been important to me, has been thinking and writing about the issue of God and human suffering his whole life.

In his most recent book, *The Cross in Our Context,* Hall underscores the two different ways of thinking about God. He calls them the "Theology of Glory" and the "Theology of the Cross."

The theology of glory almost comes naturally to us. God is almighty, all-powerful, omnipotent, omniscient. "What does the word God first suggest to you?" Hall asks. "What comes nearly unbidden to your mind? . . . When we think 'God' do we think the last word in sheer might, authority, supremacy, potency? . . . The dominant thought human beings have entertained concerning God is power," Hall concludes.

Hall argues that Western Christianity adopted the theology of glory, that from Constantine on, monarchies and empires and the church itself appropriated the theological language of power and authority and control and applied it to themselves and in that process pretty much ignored the other language, the uniquely biblical language, the language of compassion and kindness and justice and mercy and love, the language of meekness and vulnerability, the theology of the cross.

The Reformation in the sixteenth century recovered the theology of the cross at a time when the church itself had real power and authority and money and military might even. But it is a “thin” tradition, not much loved. We prefer, on measure, power, authority, control.

Hall was a student of Reinhold Niebuhr who said, “The final power of God over humankind is derived from the self-imposed weakness of God.”

I have been helped personally in this matter by Hall’s and Niebuhr’s understanding that God’s strength is not muscular, control, but, in Niebuhr’s words, “strength that is demanded of those who voluntarily forfeit their strength in order to be strong for the other” (see pp. 77–83 of *The Cross in Context*).

I think we all know the truth of that at some level. I think we know in our own relationships—relationships we would characterize as loving, with spouses, significant others, partners, relationships with parents and children, brothers and sisters—I think we know that love does not mean control or power or manipulation. I think we know, even though we often fail at it, that love means the opposite of control, means letting go, means voluntarily relinquishing control, means granting autonomy and freedom to the other.

The uniquely Christian word is that God is love. Of course God is powerful. God would not be God without almightiness. But God is essentially love. And God’s love defines God’s power.

In an earlier book Hall wrote,

> What I mean, to put it in the most childish way, is that God’s problem is not that God is not able to do certain things. God’s problem is that God loves! Love complicates the life of God as it complicates every life. (*God and Human Suffering*, p. 15)

Of course we sing “The Mighty Power of God,”

> That made the mountains rise,
> That spread the flowing seas abroad,
> And built the lofty skies.

But we also sing,

> What wondrous love is this,
> O my soul, O my soul!
> What wondrous love is this
> That caused the Lord of bliss

To bear the heavy cross
for my soul, for my soul!

Of course we sing,

A mighty fortress is our God

And also

Beneath the cross of Jesus,
I fain would take my stand.

God is love. God comes closest to us, we believe, in Jesus Christ. We see the most we can see of God, we believe, in the man Jesus, in his life and suffering and death. That is what makes us Christian.

How does it work? Where is God? My modest effort to understand, such as it is, is grounded in my own experience as a parent. Not everyone is a parent, but you don't have to be to understand this.

It is not uncommon for a parent to say, "I love my children more than life itself. . . . I didn't know I had this love in me until this child called it out of me." Parents know the unique and exquisite pain experienced when your child is hurt or wounded or sick or discouraged.

And so parents do everything they can to nurture and protect and create safety and security for children. There are rules and guidelines for this and that. "Look both ways before crossing the street. Wear your hat. Eat your vegetables. Wash your hands. Stay away from the water." All of it so modest, so routine, so expressive of love; we do everything we can to keep our children from harm.

And at the same time parents know that there is a limit to their power to protect, that for this child to become an adult, a healthy, functioning adult, freedom has to be given—which means relinquishing control and exposing your child to risks. One day you have to let go of the power to protect, and allow your child to walk to school and to cross the street alone. One day you have to allow your child to ride a bicycle, drive a car, spend the night at a friend's house. One day you drive that child to college and let go of everything and unload the suitcases and maybe offer to help make the bed the first time and hang a few pictures, and then you let go and drive away, in tears, precisely because you love them so much you have voluntarily stepped back to allow your child to be—with all the risks and potential for tragedy that freedom, born of your love, entails.

That's as close as I can come. But I believe it. I believe God is love and that the finest thing love can do is create freedom. I believe that love is never stronger, more powerful, than when it voluntarily makes itself weak and vulnerable and gives up control. I believe that is what God has in mind in coming among us, not only in the beauty and untamed power of nature, but in the child whose birth we celebrated two weeks ago. I believe God became weak and vulnerable, not coercive and manipulative, for the sake of love. I believe God does not coerce and manipulate, because to do so would be to override and overrule and overwhelm the creatures, the men and women and children, God so profoundly loves.

And one thing further, one very important thing: because God reigns not from a powerful throne, casting thunderbolts, stirring up storms and earthquakes, but reigns from a manger, in the weakness of a child, and from a cross, the symbol of human sin and tragedy—because that is the God we have seen, we know and can trust that God to be with us whatever happens to us, to share our lives, to rejoice with us and weep with us and stand with us every day of our lives up to the very last one and beyond.

Nicholas Wolterstorff wrote near the end of his book,

> We're in it together, God and me. Every act of evil extracts a tear from God, every plunge into anguish extracts a sob from God. (p. 91)

Wolterstorff wrote a prayer for his son's funeral, adapted from the *Book of Common Prayer* and our *Book of Common Worship.*

We use it here too and, for me today, for all of us, as we ponder what has happened, the thousands of innocent lives lost, the children . . . as we seek a faith to see us through the days ahead, whatever they hold for us, it is what I believe, and need and want to affirm.

May it be our prayer for all who have died and for ourselves.

> Into your tender hands, O merciful Savior, we commend your beloved servant. Acknowledge, we pray thee, a sheep of your own fold, a lamb of your own flock, a sinner of your own redeeming, receive him into the arms of your abiding mercy, into the rest of your everlasting peace, into the glorious company of those who dwell in your light.

Thanks be to God. Amen.